DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 218 353 TM 820 395

AUTHOR Pechman, Ellen
TITLE The Effects of Promotional Testing on a Large City School System.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (66th, New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; Centralization; Cost Effectiveness; Elementary Secondary Education; *Minimum Competency Testing; *Program Effectiveness; *School Organization; *State Legislation; *Student Promotion; Testing Problems; *Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS Louisiana (New Orleans); State Regulation

ABSTRACT

Discussed are the procedures implemented in the Orleans Parish Schools in response to the Louisiana state-mandated promotional testing program (Act 750, 1979), and concerns regarding its value. Recent findings raise fundamental questions about whether an exclusively skills-focused curriculum in the early years provides the needed grounding in context learning and conceptual analysis for skills to be productively applied as children grow older. Absorption with the promotional aspects of the Basic Skills Test may overly focus attention on promotional testing causing the comprehensive curriculum to give way to a curriculum of 30 testable objectives. Because state funds granted for remediation are to be used only for students who fail the promotional tests, summer programs must be established, thus causing a duplication of already existent remedial programs, as well as planning and logistical time constraints. No dollar figure has been proposed for the cost of this mandated effort in staff and teacher time or for the problems of test administration. The discussion concludes by urging testing proponents to consider whether the costs involved with such testing override the benefits and to keep alert to the need to make programmatic adjustments as they become necessary. (Author/PN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED218353

THE EFFECTS OF PROMOTIONAL TESTING ON A LARGE CITY SCHOOL SYSTEM

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
E. M. Pechman
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

By

Ellen Pechman

New Orleans Public Schools

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, 1982 (Session 10.27). The opinions presented here are solely the author's and should not be interpreted to represent those of the Orleans Parish School Board.

TM820395

I am pleased to have the opportunity to participate with my State Department colleagues in this session to discuss the local effects of Louisiana's recently implemented promotional testing program. I think the program has both practical and conceptual considerations of real importance, and my discussion will touch on both kinds of implications. I will begin with a little history of accountability activity in New Orleans.

The comprehensive accountability actions mandated by Act 750 -- the 1979 enabling legislation which called for the promotional testing program required New Orleans to make relatively few changes in its policies or practices. We established a norm-referenced testing program for all students in the district in 1975; and for the past five years, these test results have been used to guide instructional planning for individual children and for the system as a whole. There have also been Board-defined promotional policies in the district for many years, and these policies were being regularly revised and updated well before the recent period of concern about accountability. For several decades, we have funded and conducted numerous types of remedial activities for children who were having difficulties in school. Many of the programs have been paid for with local funds and, of course, we have been the beneficiaries of sizeable federal support for remediation which has been very helpful. Finally, since the late 1970's we have also been strengthening the basic or minimum skills aspects of our instruction, and our efforts in the curriculum area coincided with the legislative activity that led to Act 750. Thus, as the law has been phased in, it has reinforced and supported already existing curriculum and policy developments initiated in our district. Still the promotional testing aspect of Act 750 has impacted us in some important ways.

The effect of Act 750 was first felt in New Orleans, as in other districts across the state, when the State directed us to re-examine and redefine our existing promotional policies according to a specified procedure which included substantial input and involvement of the parent community. Thus, we established a committee which included representatives from various major organizations and constituencies, and we spent several months reviewing policies and, where necessary, adjusting our requirements to coincide with those mandated by the State. Although it is always a little cumbersome to make plans and decisions within the structure of a large committee, we had excellent support from parent and community groups and our policy revisions were successfully made according to the new requirements.

On the whole, we felt the revision process was very positive, although the only real changes we made were not based upon community input or on committee opinion, but, instead, on the State regulations themselves. Specifically, two substantive changes were made in the promotion rules: 1) in the curriculum area, mathematics and language arts were added to reading as promotional subjects, and 2) the state tests were described as being the "principal criteria" for promotion. What are the implications of these few changes? I think there are several of key importance.

First, the addition of mathematics as a promotional subject for second graders might, I think, be the most fundamental and substantive change made. Before this year, reading was the major subject area on which second grade students were evaluated for promotion. The non-math promotion policy grew out of research in recent years that recorded the delay in children's concept readiness for math. Because developmental psychologists and math researchers were telling us that children didn't usually attain the logical framework for

math learning until between the ages of six and eight, it made sense to hold off requiring math for promotion until grade three. This would, at the same time, enable us to make reading the major focus of the basic skills development during the first several years of school. Although mathematics has been included in the curriculum beginning in kindergarten, our instructional strategies and policies were oriented towards developmental and readiness activities. When children were identified as slow to respond to the math readiness programs, remediation was provided, even in the first grade, but it was not a promotional consideration. Now, as a result of the new state requirements, the expectation for children's developmental maturity in mathematics has been accelerated and has become an integral part of the decision regarding student's promotion to grade three.

While some are applauding this move as a return to the so called "basics," I fear the change may not necessarily have the expected positive results. According to our own standardized testing, about 35 to 40 percent of our students do not have the readiness skills for grade level work in mathematics when they enter school. This, of course, is because so many of our students do not get the extensive learning foundation at home that some families can give their youngsters before the school years begin. Thus, I am concerned that this change in the requirements will cause our second graders to be drilled on the 15 mathematics and 15 language arts objectives so they can pass the test. Unfortunately, the skills learned through isolated drills are not likely to be long lasting. Recent findings from the National Assessment raises fundamental questions about whether an exclusively skills-focused curriculum in the early years provides the needed grounding in context learning and conceptual analysis for the skills to be productively applied as children grow older.

The new requirement that the tests become the "principal criteria" for promotion is the second major change incorporated into our promotional rules. While, in one sense, this is a very minor portion of our overall promotion plan, in another it is probably the most dramatic element. The promotional test has been the part of the total accountability package that has captured the greatest interest and caused most alarm among teachers and the general public. Act 750 explicitly keeps the final decision regarding promotion in teachers' hands, stating that "each teacher shall, on an individual basis, determine the promotion or placement of each student," allowing only for review by a school-level representatative promotional committee. However, the State Department of Education established implementation rules which required local school systems to include the tests as the "principal criteria" for promotion in their written policies. While this has in fact meant that the tests are included as one of the several criteria for promotion, including classroom performance, attendance, other test information and so on, the wording of the requirement has caused confusion and unnecessary tension in the school community.

While basic skills testing is a fundamental component of good instructional practice, linking such testing to promotion unfortunately lends itself to easier sloganeering than to any real improvement in teaching or learning, and the tests have been attributed far more power than they have. As educators, we know that to base a child's promotion on a single test is entirely inappropriate, but there are many people -- some educators and certainly many parents and members of the community -- who believe that a test can be so used and, in this way, solves the "social promotion" problem. This claim is questionable for all children, but particularly so in regard to young children who do not have the cognitive skills that enable them to think about and control their own studying habits and thinking capacities.

My hope is that, somehow, in the implementation of the testing program, we will be able to keep our perspective about the limitations of tests that I have mentioned, and maintain the potential usefulness of conducting an annual basic skills assessment in kindergarten through the twelth grade. But, for the time being, I am concerned that we have become too absorbed with the promotional aspects of the Basic Skills Test. The publicity accompanying the testing program has inflated the test itself out of proportion to its actual importance, and, unfortunately, has caused the 30 testable objectives to become strongly emphasized in classrooms across the district. We are hard pressed to keep a reasonable calm about the test, especially with the political interest and pressure associated with it. All the administrative directives and supervisory platitudes about curriculum will have difficulty countering the intimidating public relations that has accompanied the state test. Earlier this fall, our own State Superintendent of Education contributed to the confusion by coming into the district and reporting at a press conference that, according to his staff's predictions, about 30% of New Orleans students would fail the state test. This got picked up in the newspapers as "30% of Orleans second graders will flunk second grade." Having worked closely with Mr. Nix's staff, I knew no such predictions had been made, but my corrections of these "facts" were issued to deaf ears.

My concern is that the legislative objective of Act 750 -- to strengthen educational programs -- may backfire on us. Focus on promotional testing may cause the comprehensive curriculum to give way to a thirty objective curriculum. If such a situation occurs, public schools will be providing a dull and unnourishing educational diet. Undue emphasis on testable objectives, taught in isolation from the substantive context, will make the curriculum too narrow for able students and even more difficult to comprehend for the weaker students who we are trying most to help. Although <u>no formal</u> changes have been made in the New

Orleans curriculum and teaching plan, I am concerned about the informal adjustments that have been made.

At the administrative level we have worked hard to stress the importance of continuing to teach the complete curriculum and to avoid the temptation to teach only the test. One of the major positive changes brought by Act 750 was that curriculum revisions were mandated. The State Department of Education wrote and disseminated explicitly stated curriculum standards and new curriculum guides which include suggested teaching activities and instructional materials that were sent into the parishes. We now have clear and concise lists of the minimum skills that form the foundation of a comprehensive statewide instructional program from Kindergarten through Grade 12. This effort coincides with our local initiatives and goals in the curricular area and, at the district level, we are emphasizing the importance of the minimum skills as a foundation of a wide-reaching curriculum.

Remediation is a third dimension of the pupil progression plan that has been influenced by the regulations accompanying the implementation of the state testing program. The legislation provides funds to support remediation for students who "fail to meet the minimum mastery levels." Since the problem of student achievement is one we in New Orleans have faced for many years, we already have numerous developmental and remedial programs designed for "at risk" students, beginning as early as Grade 1. The state funds accompanying the testing program are earmarked for use only on students who fail the promotional test, thereby requiring the district to establish a supplemental remedial effort which stands apart from the continuing effort in this direction. Since we won't know who fails the test until after the end of the year, the remediation will be offered in the summer, well after the failure has occurred. Our preference would be to use state funds to provide remediation for students before the failure and accompanying labeling occurs.

While additional funds for remediation are always appreciated in a district such as ours, certain logistical and curricular problems are also posed by this type of supplemental funding. Since state funds can only be used for students who fail the state test, we must establish special summer programs for this group. If students are placed apart in state-funded remedial programs, it is logical that teachers will emphasize the nonmastered objectives, and not necessarily the broadbased diagnostic needs of children. Such an objective-centered approach will be of greatest assistance to borderline achievers who are just shy of meeting minimum requirements and need only a little additional instructional assistance to bring their performance to grade level. But this type of program is unlikely to help the students who have more comprehensive achievement problems and who missed the 75% mastery target by a great deal. Thus, it is not clear if summer school remediation can sufficiently assist the students who are most in need of educational support.

An additional important issue which is currently concerning us is the planning of the summer programs. The funds, of course, will not be available until after the results of the test are in, so it is quite a challenge to initiate the kind of comprehensive planning needed to undertake a smooth running program in the summer. We are making very general estimates of the size and locations of our programs, but it will be enormously difficult for us to have classes staffed, supplied and implemented, especially in a district of our size, in the six weeks following the date we receive our test results and identify the students who require remediation. Remediation planning efforts are well underway, but we are groping in the dark and it is difficult to determine how effectively or successfully we will be able to use the resources provided for the targeted students.

Finally, I want to speak to the problems of administration that accompany the implementation of a large scale testing program, especially one which is as sensitive and as highly charged as this one. Issues relating to test security,

consistency and standardization of test administration, monitoring, and even the simple logistics associated with packaging and assuring the accuracy of the computer scanned test responses are all major concerns. Any one of these areas can become problematic even in a small school district, and the problems are multiplied each time an additional test administrator, test coordinator or principal is interpreting the procedures.

Of course, the expected questions have surfaced regarding the rules for testing special education and limited English speaking populations. While, as you have heard, a good deal of effort has been put into clarifying these issues at the state level, at the classroom administration level we depend upon teachers' understanding of what they read. Even with experienced and specially trained test administrators, consistency of test implementation is hard to achieve. Classroom teachers with little testing experience will be expected to intuitively follow the twists and turns of test procedure and to precisely administer the tests according to all the specifications of the written rules. Even the clearest writing effort in testing produces a language foreign to many teachers, and when the rules are applied with groups of several hundred children in schools, especially with young children, we can't be entirely certain of the outcome.

Under the best of circumstances, the implementation of a testing program across a school system our size -- we have almost 7000 second graders -- is a major effort. In a situation such as this, every small issue is greatly magnified in importance. Added central office and school level personnel are needed to coordinate and manage the flow of information and materials. While central support has been slightly augmented at the school level, additional staff support and release time are required if the most careful implementation of the test procedures is to be assured. But neither additional staffing nor

release time has been funded by Act 750, so we will lean on the generosity, dedication and good intuition of a few key teachers and support personnel at each school. In the central office, we have already spent several months of staff time and thousands of dollars producing curriculum guides and instructional materials. Soon more money will be invested to check, sort and package test materials when they arrive in the district. In schools, substantial effort must be made to recheck children's computer scanned responses to assure that the coded information is clearly machine readable so results will accurately reflect what students intended to write. No dollar figure has been projected for the cost of this effort in staff time and, particularly, for teaching time lost to school level planning and logistical activities.

Some will argue that the benefits of this testing program outweigh the costs, especially because of the diagnostic information the test will provide. I hope this is true, but I am skeptical. Even if we assume that the test has the psychometric quality we expect, and that the testable objectives represent the central instructional core of knowledge children need for later learning--assumptions which remain to be validated -- still, the tests only provide us with information which every good classroom teacher routinely collects during the school year. By May, when we receive the diagnostic feedback, the data will be long past its usefulness. Teachers already well know whether or not their students can read and do mathematics, and the substantive information on which to make the promotional decisions has already been reported to parents. The test will merely confirm the label of failure on those who have been failing all along, and it will mean little to those who are succeeding.

In a large school district which is short of funds, high in needs, and struggling to meet complex and conflicting human and instructional demands, a testing program is an emotionally and financially draining experience. Testing

is nonetheless essential and must be conducted if we are to have the objective information necessary for planning comprehensive instruction. The question must be asked, however, whether a promotion-focused testing program gives a good return for the effort. "We are full of the basics," argues a colleague of mine, "it's the complexities which are sorely lacking." Are we indeed neglecting the complex issues regarding the education of children? Is the focus on a promotional testing program working on behalf of educational improvement or against it? These are the questions which must be kept in mind as we observe the implementation of this program. It will be particularly important for us to be honestly alert to the program impact and to be wise enough to make adjustments as they become necessary and before such changes are too late.